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ABSTRACT

To examine the writing process of personnel who write as part of their jobs and the relation of that process to the context in which they worked, a study was undertaken in a major corporation. Its aim was to research a model for teaching technical writing students that would bridge the gap between the classroom and the probable writing situations these students will encounter upon leaving the university. Data were gathered through attitude protocol analysis and interviews. Results showed that writing, reading, speaking, and listening played nearly equal roles in communication, and that language was a motivating activity for a community with specific common aims and purposes. In contrast, it was noted that students are often taught the least important aspects of technical writing. Solutions offered include developing cross-curriculum writing in specialty areas and creating motivated language communities in composition and literature classes. (CRH)

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Technical Writing, Revision, and Language Communities

As a teacher at a technological university I have a particular interest in the theory and practice of technical writing. At Michigan Tech, where I teach, we have 100 students whose major field is Scientific and Technical Communication. Recently, however, I have found that professors in traditional English departments--i.e., where the majority of majors are in composition or English--have also become interested in technical writing. I understand from these sometimes disgruntled professors that the administrations at their universities or colleges believe that students need technical, business, or professional writing courses. And, it may go without saying, those administrators believe that such courses will be filled, and let's face it, Beaumont and Fletcher and the Lesser Dramatists of the 17th Century did fail to make again this year.

Teachers placed in this position must ask, as I asked when I prepared to teach my first few technical writing courses, what can I present to my students which will have practical value once they get into the "real world?" I frankly did not know what constituted written communication outside of the academy. Because of my concern, I arranged to spend part of a summer investigating writing at a corporation. I wanted to examine, in particular, the writing processes of the personnel who wrote as part of their jobs and the relation of that process to the context in which they worked. I was interested in developing from this

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research a model for teaching my technical writing students which would help bridge the gap between the classroom and the possible (and probably varied) writing situations they would be exposed to once they left the university.

I worked with four research procedures for this project. First, I surveyed all of the writers in the corporation to find out how often they wrote, what their attitudes toward writing were, what specific communication skills they considered important, and what features of writing they considered significant for writing they did on the job. Second, I took protocols of eight writers--four managers and four engineers--to examine the processes of writing in a corporate setting. Third, I conducted a variation of what Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami have called "discourse based interviews" in order to identify the kinds of revising decisions writers were making on the job. Fourth, I spent five or six hours a day talking to personnel, and listening to and watching the activities which went on around me.

I went into the project with certain assumptions about writing. I believed that my research would generally confirm the findings of research on the processes of writers done in laboratory settings and on both students and professional writers. In particular, I felt I would find that these managers and engineers had strategies for revision which would be useful for my less-expert students to learn. I also believed I would find that writers in the corporation had a fairly sophisticated rhetorical sensitivity. Both of these assumptions proved correct, but in ways which I had not anticipated. The differences between what I might call the structure of my assumptions and what I observed have certain important implications for classroom teaching. It is the purpose of this

paper to detail briefly these findings and their implications.

The data from protocols and interviews, although my analyses is not yet complete, show the writers in this corporation practicing a variety of revision strategies and demonstrating a concern for purpose, audience, and style. Having said this, however, I need to draw some major distinctions between the revising processes I saw and those suggested by other protocol studies and also to draw distinctions between the environment in which this writing took place and the environment of the typical academic classroom. The writing in the corporation formed part of a constant, all-encompassing language environment. The writers believed that all language activities--writing, reading, talking, and listening made a difference in this environment and would enlarge or move forward the mutual projects in which writers/speakers and readers/listeners were engaged. One evidence of this sense of a total language environment was how closely they saw writing approximate or report on speech. Their revision strategies were suggestive of this similarity. ALthough the corporation had a complex flow chart for documents, and writers, therefore, knew that they would have to revise they did not seem to do so as they wrote any specific draft. In their protocols, for example, the revisions they made showed the rapid audience awareness that we are more used to seeing when people speak face to face. I hypothesize that because most writing they did received feedback, these writers were more likely to write as if to an immediate audience. When asked to comment on the phenomenon, they showed that they were conscious of this close relationship between speech and writing and of the environmental cause for it. A representative comment might be useful as an example. Here, a product manager begins outlining a month-end report:

> To me, in some cases, it's very important dealing either with internal people here in our division or with other departments in the building or with trading companies. That takes a fair amount of time sometimes--verbal interchange, either on the phone or in person, then summarizing those things and then writing the report to determine the action to be taken after that and basically summarizing all those events for some group for a decision, whether it's my decision, or my boss's or whoever. So basically, going back, the objective of this task is report consolidation and eventually that's going to be improved by activity. [He then makes a long list of departments involved.]

This brief paragraph is rich with information on rhetorical sensitivity; it is suggestive of the total language environment in which this individual works. Finally, it shows the degree to which he is confident that what he says or writes will make a difference, lead to some decision. We can look at this from a different perspective and see how the people I talked to viewed writing as an extension of speech in part because they were all part of of a language community which shared the desire to accomplish common goals. One evidence of this came from an engineer, who commented in the middle of a protocol that "what I would probably do at this point . . . is just let it sit for a while. Probably talk to a number of people, people who might have major involvement." I do not mean to suggest, however, that these writers do not see a difference between speech and writing. What is of interest is the

kind of differences they see.

In a later session, in response to a question about whether his writing was intiated from outside or was self-initiated the engineer quoted above said "[written communication comes from outside], yes. I'd say a lot of my other communication is verbal. Most of the day to day verbal conversations and communications are probably more important than most of the information that's going down in writing. [You write it] because you have to be very specific . . . so it won't change on you all the time . . .so you get it written down so it stays that way. In verbal conversation things float but once you write it down at least, that's it. Unless you change that written communication, you've stated your position." Thus, when I say much writing in the corporation approximates speech I am not saying that there is not a difference, even a difference of which these people are conscious, between speech and writing. Rather, it is that writing is used functionally as a continuation of speech. It is as if documents were the records of speech--"you end up," this same engineer said, "writing it down out of frustration. Some of these things--discussions, conversations-- go on for weeks and finally you say well okay, I've just got to stop it here, this is it."

Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami found a similar language context in their study of writing in non-academic settings. They comment: "The [research] showed that the [non-academic writers] perceived their writing as part of a larger sequence of events, those that preceded their writing and those that were likely to stem from their statements . . . [they] saw their audience as immediate and having a

need for the information contained in their writing . . ." Odell and Goswami in their study of selected governmental agencies looked at the environment of writers separated from their audiences by a much greater distance than the audiences for most of the writing done within the corporation where I did my research. It is therefore reasonable that the environment which I encountered consisted of an even tighter community than the one they describe. Although I would not want to generalize too broadly, I think that I might safely suggest that these two language environments are far more representative of the non-academic world than they are of the language environments our students encounter. The most significant difference lies not in the nature of specific types or modes of writing. Students can be easily given a whole series of specific writing assignments, some with rhetorical introductions designed to approximate the settings of the non-academic world. But role-playing, although it may have a use, can only approximate actual rhetorical situations. If I may be permitted an analogy, no one ever became king by playing the role of Henry VIII. What students lack in many technical writing classes is not practice in producing formats, resumes, memoes, proposals, and the like. Rather they lack the motivated language community which surrounds and interpenetrates all language acitivity in the workplace.

When I speak of a motivated language community, I intend for "motivated" to modify both language and language community. That is, the language produced in such an environment is motivated by the purposes of the members of the environment. But these members are part of a community precisely because they share language

activities, it is their shared language that makes them a group with common aims and goals. Some of you will already see that I'm talking or preparing to talk about a growing theoretical movement in literary study--reader reponse. The work of Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, and Stanley Fish in reader response theory has something to say about this whole subject because it deals with language communities--both how language communities come into existence and how they function. A theoretical discussion of how language communities come into existence is probably not to the point here; first, because we don't have enough time to do the subject justice, and second, because I hope that I have already suggested the existence of such communities in the workplace. I will take up the remainder of my time therefore in a more practical pursuit: I will suggest what we might do with our classes in order to approximate the language community which students will find when they leave us.

It may be useful for me to briefly summarize what we have already covered. In the corporation where I did my research I found that writing, reading, speaking, and listening played at least equal roles in communication. But more importantly, these roles were not sharply differentiated--language was an activity motivated by and motivating a community with specific common aims and purposes. These aims and purposes, although varied, existed in a context that all members of the community understood. In addition, all of these members had input that led to decisions, knowledge, and meaningful activity. In short, language activity in the workplace is both a communication activity and a knowledge making activity. If we contrast this with the traditional technical writing class, we will

be struck by how often we teach students the least important part of technical communications. Students actually need to participate in a language community motivated to work on some common project, to solve problems related to that project, to develop their own knowledge about the project, and to formulate judgements directed to accomplish this goal. I believe we should proceed to teach technical writing courses from two inter-related, theoretical premises. First, that language is the major shaper of and most viable route to learning and knowledge. And second, that in John Dewey's words, the "starting point of any process of thinking is something going on, something which just as it stands is incomplete or unfulfilled. Its point, its meaning lies naturally in what is going to be, in how it is going to turn out."(Dewey, 501)

How should we put these premises into practice? I believe we are offered two choices. The first is to develop writing across the curriculum in the specialties our technical students require for their future professions. This method has the advantage of appearing eminantly practical to students and to administrators. It has the disadvantage of leaving the teaching of language to teachers least acquainted with modern composition theory and research, and rhetorical and literary theory. We are not trying to teach a series of specific technical skills; we are teaching individual and community language awareness. I see writing-across-the-curriculum as valuable in other contexts and for other purposes but as limited here. The second choice is to encourage the creation in our composition and literature classes of motivated language communities. Students may study content with which we are familiar.

We provide a pedagogical framework which aims at making students responsible for creating knowledge as a community in the classroom. The subject of the course is the language activity of the students. I may summarize by saying that it is essential for students to be made aware of five facts. First, that their language affects others; second, that they have intuitive ways of doing so; third, that there is a growing body of research and theory in rhetoric, composition, and literary criticism which informs these ways of using language; fourth, that writing is both a process of communicating and a process of learning and formulating ideas; and fifth, that their mutual language activity will, actually, direct the course. The course content can be Shakespeare, or Milton, or Dickens, or Austin, or Plath, or the Pre-Raphaelite movement in art and literature. The content can be the role of rhetoric in modern society, or an analysis of composition theories. For example, the context of a technical writing course conceived in this way could be selected plays of Shakespeare and the problem for the class could be to develop a theory of Shakespearean comedy. They would read several plays (perhaps both comedies and tragedies) and work together to solve the central problem of the class. Their work would involve talking about their own understanding of comedy, sharing examples and associations from their experience in their lives or from other media, writing proposals and analyses of their emerging theories, getting feedback from each other and the teacher, researching theories of comedy, or the history of Shakespeare's work and times. In addition, and this is the essential part of the course, students will also be asked frequently to write and talk about what they are

doing with language in the class. They will take protocols, conduct retrospective interviews with each other, examine and report in a variety of formats on their processes of research, composing, and reading. In short, the subject of the class will be the context and process of students' "languaging" strategies. The selection of content remains important because the class must have content they want to develop into knowledge. But it is more important that the students become aware of how, through language, they make it all turn out. That, of course, will be the most difficult thing to do, for we must give up the concept of that we as technical writing teachers have a body of specific a priori material students must master and replace it with the concept that students need to become conscious of how they use language to complete that which is incomplete. But perhaps this will not be so difficult afterall, when we realize that it is what our students most need to learn.